

Hearing on Military Families

Bill Number: Oversight

Hearing Date: June 2, 2003

Witness:

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Testimony:

Good afternoon, I am honored to provide input to these field hearings on how well the Army serves our soldier's families and children during a major deployment. As Director, Community Activities Business Center, I am responsible for administering the Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) programs at Fort Campbell as well as the Army Community Services (ACS), Army Substance Abuse Program, Lodging and Continuing Education Programs.

The support Fort Campbell has been able to provide to the families and children has been outstanding. I attribute this to the great programs that the Army has in place to provide this support, a tremendously supportive surrounding community, an installation commander and garrison commander who care, and excellent communication with the families, primarily through the Family Readiness Groups (FRGs). We have successfully improved processes as a result of lessons learned in Desert Shield/ Storm. Many of these improvements have come from getting input from the families that we are supporting and the senior FRG leaders have been a great source of ideas in this regard.

I will summarize some of our successes:

**COMMUNICATION TO THE FAMILY MEMBERS:** This has been a huge success and has started at the top. The Installation Commander holds routine meetings with the spouses of senior leaders and the leaders of the primary FRGs. We make extensive use of that forum as well as the mailboxes at the FRC to alert family members of opportunities available to them, both on and off post. The Rear Detachment Commanders have also been a great conduit of information to the families.

**FAMILY ASSISTANCE CENTER (FAC):** Upon deployment of the soldiers, the Garrison Commander directed the stand up of the FAC to provide a "one-stop shop" to provide virtually all assistance a family might need. The FAC is located in the Lee Family Center, a building that already houses most of the ACS functions. Personnel from Finance, Personnel, Legal Assistance, Tri-Care and Health Services joined Army Emergency Relief, Exceptional Family Member Services, Relocation Assistance, Employment Assistance and other services already in the building. Family members also have immediate access to information on Child and Youth Services, Community Mental Health, American Red Cross, Housing, Transportation and the Chaplains Office. A food closet and emergency housing assistance are also available at the center, though the latter has not yet been needed. On site childcare is provided at no charge so the parent could seek assistance without the distraction of tending to the needs of their children. We also have a toll free number in order to provide assistance for family members living outside of the Fort Campbell Community. This center has been especially important for the families of Reserve Component Soldiers that have little on-going contact with the military community.

**FAMILY READINESS GROUP (FRG) SUPPORT:** We have long had a Family Readiness Center (FRC) to support our FRGs. The center includes a meeting area, mailboxes for over 200 groups, public access computers, printing support, copier support and training materials. Upon deployment, the Commanding General (CG) immediately directed that we increase the funding for this center to support the increased printing/copier demands to maintain communication with the families and to provide training materials for the FRG deployment meetings. Additional copiers were made available as well to meet the demand. Our goal is to expand this facility even further, to include providing more space and on site child care.

**ARMY FAMILY TEAM BUILDING PROGRAM (AFTB):** This program, which provides training to family members on the military environment, financial readiness and the like, proved its worth during the deployment. Families are better prepared than they might otherwise have been. Further, with the training modules in place they are able to export training to groups as needed.

**CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES:** Fort Campbell's childcare and youth services are exemplary in normal conditions and they have proved themselves capable of providing exceptional services in extraordinary conditions. As we became aware of the need for expanded services needed due to deployment preparations, we immediately expanded the hours of the Child Development Centers, at no additional charge to the parents. This included nights, weekends and holidays as needed. As stated above, we set up a satellite childcare facility in the FAC, also at no charge. When the Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) needed to meet on deployment issues we provided free childcare for them, either on site or at the centers. Family Child Care Homes proved to be a special asset. These providers were available to care for children 24 hours a day. In some cases they are also included in soldiers' Family Care Plans as the primary custodian of the children. This is especially important for single and dual military parents.

**ENTERTAINMENT EVENTS:** MWR was able to gain sponsorship from businesses and charities to provide monthly, free of charge, "Family Fun Days" at various activities on post. These events incorporate things like fire safety emphasis with games for children and free food and drinks. They have been very successful with as many as 3500 participants and have garnered extremely positive feedback. We have conducted these events since March when it was done concurrently with the opening of a new Fire Department in the Lee Village housing area. The April event was held at Hooper Bowling Alley and the May event at Destiny Parks and Pavilions/Horse Stables. All events include information booths on such things as Safety, Continuing Education Opportunities, Library Services, etc. as well as inflatable games for the younger children, dunking booths, climbing walls and the like.

**CROSS LEVELING OF RESOURCES:** We were able to divert personnel from activities that have a primarily soldier support function to those with a family support function, which kept our costs down significantly. For example, some of the government employees that normally work on drug prevention classes in the units were diverted to the FAC when their workload decreased due to the deployment. Likewise, some of the government employees involved in soldier education counseling were also diverted to the FAC. Having these resources available helped tremendously, but would have been **CRITICAL** if the Family Assistance Center had had to open on a 24 hour a day basis, which we were prepared to do upon demand.

**REFOCUSING OF SOLDIER FACILITIES/SERVICES TO FAMILIES:** We made a special effort to refocus facilities and services that were in place to support the soldiers to benefit families and youth. For example:

- Fort Campbell has six Physical Fitness Centers that exist to support soldier fitness/readiness. We focused on the family's needs and family usage was up about 43%.
- We have two exceptional softball complexes with four fields each that are dedicated primarily for soldier intramural sports. Since the demand from units is down, we have reconfigured one of the facilities for youth sports programs.

**COMMUNITY SUPPORT:** This has been absolutely outstanding. Various organizations have raised about \$200,000 in support of the families living in the Fort Campbell community. Some of these funds have been provided to support MWR events such as the Family Fun Days, events at the on-post schools, childcare in exceptional circumstances, and the individual needs of soldiers and their families. We have even had to designate a "Donations Manager" to keep track of the outpouring of support. Individuals and businesses have asked to "sponsor" a family; we have literally gotten truckloads of products for "any soldier" or for their families. There is no question that the surrounding communities support the soldiers, families and especially the kids.

Naturally there are things that could be done better:

**CHILD CARE:** Upon deployment there is a critical and almost unending need for childcare. First and foremost, the soldier needs to get his/her unit ready to deploy so they cannot be released from work at the usual time and need expanded child care. They often need weekend and holiday child care as well. Family Readiness Groups need to have meetings to help the families prepare for deployment and to keep them informed. There is a need for childcare in the Family Assistance Center as mentioned above, and also emergency childcare, especially in the event of casualties. There is also the need for respite care for the parent that has no break and no assistance in their parental responsibilities. Congress has provided resources for "contingency related child care". Often, the installation must provide the services and reimbursement comes after the fact. This is not the best way to manage operations, but supporting soldiers is the goal. Quicker reimbursement would ease the burden on the installation.

**SUPPORT FOR EXCEPTIONAL FAMILY MEMBER CHILDREN:** EFMP childcare needs often cannot be provided for on post. For example, we had a family with four special needs children; two were diabetic and required insulin injections. Government child development facilities are not staffed with the medical personnel authorized to administer shots. The respite care for this family had to be provide off post, and but for the Chaplain's Fund, we would have been unable to meet the needs of this family.

**FAMILY READINESS CENTER:** As stated, this is a great initiative to support the FRGs. Because we had an FRC in place, the transition to deployment conditions was relatively easy. One shortcoming was the lack of some specific resource materials that are not available through Army channels. FRGs and families voice the need for and value of some books, comic books, coloring books, etc. that help explain the departure of a parent to their children. Some of these materials cost as much as \$5 each and we are unable to devote the necessary resources to stockpile or reproduce them by the tens of thousands needed. Recommend that "deployment kits" for FRCs with these materials be made available copying the kits that the library system stockpiles for use during deployments. This is a critical need, and is often overlooked (over 20,000 paperbacks were handed out

to soldiers as they deployed.) This would provide a ready supply of deployment materials and could be used during major deployments at any impacted installation.

In closing I would like to say that it is these family support services that are key to keeping families in the area where they can be better nurtured, and kept aware of the information they need to have. They also serve to help with long-term retention of our great soldiers. I am extremely proud of what CABC, the post, as a whole and the surrounding communities have done to put their arms around the military families. Fort Campbell is a great place to live, work, play, and when the need arises, be supported during a deployment.